El paraíso mio: The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Puerto Rico's Tourism Industry

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“EL PARAÍSO MIO:
THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON
PUERTO RICO’S TOURISM INDUSTRY”

By

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A Thesis submitted to the Department of
Anthropology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with
Honors in the Major

Degree Awarded:
Spring, 2021
The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Carlos Rivera Fernandez’s defended on March 29, 2021.

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Abstract

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic to Puerto Rico is like many of the other crises the island has faced in the last five years. It has been characterized by an apathetic government which would rather succumb to pro-business interests than serve the general public. One of the primary businesses which attracts external investment to the island, tourism, is simultaneously responsible for the spread and prevalence of the disease. From the early stages of the industry in the 1950s, Puerto Rican leaders saw tourism as a threat to general well being. Yet the promise of capital associated with its development was enough to overlook the long-term effects the industry would have. Today, Puerto Ricans are facing those effects, with 10% of the GDP being shut down in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the accelerated reopening of the industry perpetuating contagion on the island. This study combines news articles, press releases, and interview evidence on tourism in Puerto Rico during the COVID-19 pandemic to argue that an increasing dependence upon an outdated form of tourism has been and remains unsustainable for both economic markets and people. With a historical section on the development of the tourism sector further contributing to the literature of systematic neglect for safety and stability, this study will outline how tourism dependency is problematic for Puerto Rico specifically, but also for any developing country. It will also attempt to overview potential solutions offered by academics and journalists in renewable and sustainable tourism, with an emphasis on educative rather than exploitive tourism.
Acknowledgements

I’ve never written anything in full solitude. Never has that been more true than in the case of this honors thesis.

I should start by thanking my parents, Carlos A. Rivera and Odemaris Fernandez. It’s hard to put to words how much debt I owe them, not just for putting me through my undergraduate degree but consistently supporting me regardless of what bad decision I had made at the last turn. Mamá y Papá, han sido mi roca. Los amo mucho y en cien vidas no les podría agradecer suficientemente por todo que me han dado.

My teachers, who have been my mentors and guides throughout my academic career. Mrs Annette Levine for teaching me the true importance of my voice, Dr Juan Gonzalez for first infecting me with a passion for anthropology, Dr Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya for helping me spread that passion throughout disciplines, Dr Joseph Hellweg for his guidance in grant applications, Dr Choeeta Chakrabarti for the last-minute (my fault) advice on ethnographic interviews, Dr Amy Kowal for her consistent support throughout my undergraduate career, and Dr Vincent Joos for serving as much a mentor as a role model.

My friends, for whom I’m so grateful. My sisters, Adriana and Elisa, for never letting me take myself too seriously, no matter how many languages I decide to learn. Majed Makhlouf, for even though we weren’t able to go to Puerto Rico for this project, we will go soon (واشنطن سوريَا). Gabriella Alexander, for being there when I need her most. Te amo.

I would also like to thank my family in Puerto Rico. My cousins, aunts, uncles, fictive kin and otherwise. Son la inspiración que llevó este estudio a cabo. Los amo mucho y no puedo esperar para poder abrazarlos otra vez. Y a mis abuelos: Arnaldo Fernandez, Digna Cintrón,
Natividad Perez, y Vicente Rivera. Si este estudio esta dedicado a alguien, es a ustedes. Besos y abrazos de su nieto prodigo. Los amo mucho y los veo pronto.
San Juan is Puerto Rico’s capital. In the early centuries of Spanish colonialism, the city functioned as a port-of-ways between the gold-rich Mexican mainland and Iberia (Mintz 2010:137). Today, the metropolitan area houses 2.5 of the island’s nearly 3 million residents (Macrotrends 2021). The city also receives over one million visitors per annum, who engage in both cruise ship and overnight tourism (Trading Economics 2020). This mix of chronic overpopulation and a consistent influx of nonnative visitors rendered San Juan susceptible to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Introduction:  
Whose Paradise Is It?

“Una mañana siempre sale el sol primero / Y se llena de luz el paraíso mio”  “Morning always first brings out the sun / And my paradise is filled with light”

– Orquesta Broadway, “Isla del Encanto”

The cobalt cobblestone streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico are lined with myriad shops. Trinkets displayed in windows appeal to the consumer desires of passerby tourists. Often there are wooden coqui figurines, engraved with aboriginal Taíno markings. Sometimes there are towels designed with a map of the island, each town distinguishable with its own unique landmark – Ponce’s cherry red Parque de Bombas, Cabo Rojo’s lighthouse and promontory, Arecibo’s (now defunct and destroyed) telescope. In other corners of the city, historical sites abound, with La Fortaleza and El Morro de San Felipe drawing in millions of visitors per year. The rustic ambience offered by the Spanish colonial architecture, once known for housing one of the largest slave ports in the Caribbean, is now the backdrop for what mid-20th century tourism ads describe as “a land of song and laughter” (Wright 1953).

This idyll is a common perception of Puerto Rico by its visiting tourists. The island serves as one of many manifestations of the Beach Boys’ “tropical contact high” for those looking to get away from their monotonous work lives at global peripheries to enjoy the sun, sea, and sand offered by Caribbean islands. This idea of la isla del encanto (the island of
enchantment) was stimulated in the post-WWII era, when the rapidly-growing middle class began turning towards “sun and sand” tourism for escapism (Merril 2001:179-180). Puerto Rico served as one of the prime getaways for American tourists. The island offered the benefits of nearby travel that while foreign to many, was still domestic in its lack of a passport requirement. As such, after governor Luis Muñoz Marín’s pro-business Popular Democratic Party came into power in 1948, the government incentivized external investors with lucrative tax exemptions while also sponsoring tourism development projects with public funding (Picó 2017:271; Ward 2008:16). Both the government and private investors exploited the myth of the eternal sustainability of beach tourism (Ward 2008:xix). Among the external investors were hotel and hospitality moguls like Conrad Hilton and the Rockefeller brothers, the latter of whom took a liking to the idyllic beach and colonial hacienda infrastructures at Dorado. This led them to construct the first decentralized resort in the 1950s, away from the tourist hub of San Juan, with a $1.3 million loan from the state-owned Puerto Rican Industrial Development Company (PRIDCO) (Ward 2008:69). This, at a time when many working Puerto Rican families were living in run-down shantytowns and fringe communities on marginal public land (Safa 1974:12), represents the ultimate deception of the Puerto Rican people by their own government, wherein infrastructural development only occurs when there is a profit to be made.

Today, much of Puerto Rico’s urban economy, and especially that of its capital, San Juan, has developed around the influx of over one million tourists annually (2019 statistic) (Trading Economics 2020). Cruise ship companies, from regional players like Royal Caribbean to international lines like Costa, port at San Juan to deliver thousands of visitors at a time before disembarking the next night. Luxury hotels like the Caribé Hilton and La Concha Renaissance
compete for stays from some of the biggest spenders in overnight tourism. Alongside commercial airliners, tour operators, and packaged vacations, these corporate institutions contribute to persistence of Puerto Rico’s tourism economy, in which over 80,000 Puerto Ricans were employed in March 2020 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). However, only a month later, with the full force of the COVID-19 pandemic forcing the virtual shutdown of all travel, monthly tourist entry into the island was reduced from almost 200,000 to just over 50,000, and the tourism industry labor force dropped to 46,900 (ibid).

These statistics are jarring for Puerto Rico, a polity which the UN defines as a small island developing state (SIDS). SIDS, on average, have a tourism sector which “accounts for almost 30% of the gross domestic product” (Coke-Hamilton in Sheller 2020:2). As such, falling rates in tourism have demonstrated the urgent need to “rebuild more sustainable economies and societies ‘beyond tourism’” (Thompson in ibid). Despite this need, however, many SIDS, including Puerto Rico, have found themselves accommodating to the situation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic instead of spearheading sustainable forms of tourism. Testing kit prices and other accommodations to pandemic protocols have caused setbacks in economic recovery of SIDS across the world (Charles & Dolven 2021). Even then, a short supply of lab kits and the unreliability of antigen rapid detection tests among the “traveling population” have shown that the desperate attempts by tourism dependencies to maintain the pre-COVID status quo are dangerous to both the traveling parties and their insular hosts. Particularly grave is the case of Haiti, which, according to leading infectious disease specialist Dr Jean William Pape, receives about “2,000 patients daily in need of testing” (in Charles & Dolven 2021).
This study, using the example of Puerto Rico during the COVID-19 pandemic, argues that an increasing dependence upon an outdated form of tourism has been and remains unsustainable. During the last year, attempts have been made by the insular government to adapt to the pandemic by purchasing a suspect $38 million testing kit package (Latino USA 2020), implementing a 11pm-5am curfew (Coto 2021), and, despite initial pleas to the federal government to close borders, continuing interstate travel (Puerto Rican Tourism Company 2020). By further adapting the tourism industry to accommodate the crises brought about by late-stage capitalism, only minuscule or immediate problems – such as “getting people back to work” – can be resolved. Larger problems, such as the lack of sovereignty on the island preventing Puerto Ricans the right to determine their own economy, are buried and neglected. This leads to such catastrophes as seen in the aftermath of Hurricane María and the COVID-19 pandemic. During the latter, tourism, one of the most prominent economic sectors of the island, has posed a severe contagion threat to the island, with potentially viremic tourists risking spread to non-catalyzed residents. Later, the tourism sector would all but collapse following the global shutdown, causing widespread job losses and economic distress. The pro-business ideologies and practices of the government are quite literally killing Puerto Ricans.

This study tracks the historical development of Puerto Rico’s tourism industry, and compares it with actual analysis and data on tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic from news sources, press releases, and interviews with visitors to Puerto Rico during the pandemic. In so doing, this study will outline the toxicities brought about by creating a critical economic sector which is dependent on the influx of external capital. It also briefly attempts to offer solutions from academics, journalists, and industry operatives regarding the future of tourism in
sustainability and renewability, with a particular focus on educative rather than exploitive tourism. Ultimately, the study highlights how tourism, as it now exists, is by no means a new model for leisure. Rather, it is just another phase in the continued exploitation of communities in the global south for the benefit of the global north. This exploitation particularly privileges wealthier and whiter mobilities over those of the people who suffer the most during these crises (Sheller 2020:9).
How To Build for Destruction:  
Tourism and Industrialization in Puerto Rico, 1950s

“In 1956 Governor Luis Muñoz Marín expressed serious reservations concerning the ultimate size and contribution of tourism. He stated that tourism should never become the primary economic activity of Puerto Rico.” (Mings 1968:9)

To arrive at downtown San Juan from Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport, one must take the Expreso Román Baldorioty de Castro. The highway passes through several coastal communities such as Isla Verde, Santurce, and Condado, all of which are lined with beachside steel and concrete hotels first erected in the 1950s. These luxurious monuments served as part of Operation Bootstrap, in which the industrialization and urbanization of Puerto Rico would be catalyzed by the island’s ability to attract private, mostly external capital (Bel 2011:2). Spearheaded by Teodoro Moscoso, the head of the state-owned Puerto Rican Industrial Development Company (PRIDCO), Operation Bootstrap utilized tourism as an economic development tool that would launch the island into modernity (Ward 2008:16). Though Governor Luis Muñoz Marín was initially hesitant about the role tourism would play in Puerto Rico’s modernization, Moscoso remained adamant about exploiting the sector for its attractiveness towards external capital and investment (Maldonado 1997:121). In promoting Puerto Rico as a paradise destination, Moscoso ultimately attracted the attention of Conrad Hilton, for whom PRIDCO built San Juan’s renowned Caribé Hilton Hotel.
The Caribé Hilton is located just off of the Expreso Baldorioty on the San Juan Island. Grounded in 1946 with a nearly $7 million budget paid for by PRIDCO, the hotel opened in December 1949 (TIME 1949). Its effect on the local economy was considerable, not only serving as a luxury beachfront experience for visiting tourists, but also stimulating the further attraction and arrival of American companies and businesses to the island (Ward 2008:23). “There have been over 280 industries established in Puerto Rico since the opening of the Caribé Hilton,” boasted Hilton International executive vice president John Houser in a 1954 Congressional testimony (ibid). The Caribé Hilton would go on to become Operation Bootstrap’s “single greatest success story” (Maldonado 1997:128).

This development arose from the pro-business ideology of Governor Muñoz Marín’s Partido Popular Democrático. Upon winning the 1948 elections, the party took a turn from previous eras by neglecting to discuss political status and instead focusing on economic reform (Bel 2011:2). PRIDCO was at the forefront of this new industrial economy, which came to replace the agricultural, plantation-based economy that had dominated Puerto Rico for the last two centuries (Picó 2017:271). Among the important aspects listed by the company to reinvigorate the island’s economy was the “encouragement of private industrial enterprise, and the development of tourism as a source of income for the island” (Bel 2011:5). As such, under the direction of Moscoso, PRIDCO began funding construction projects focused on the development of tourism infrastructure meant to bolster a new, modern economy which fueled postwar American desires to undertake foreign travel (Ward 2008:22).

PRIDCO’s objectives were initially undertaken through heavy government involvement in the industrialization of the island (Bel 2011:2). However, with the election of Muñoz Marín as
governor in 1948, increasing privatization of assets would occur by offering tax exemptions to private investments for a period of up to 17 years (Picó 2017:271). This privatization campaign included the sale of public infrastructural manufacturers, as when PRIDCO sold its cement, glass, paper, and clay subsidiaries to later-Governor Luis Ferré’s family-owned company (Bel 2011:7). Muñoz Marín’s administration, known generally as Fomento (“development”), subsequently became responsible for the “peaceful decade of 1955-1965, which saw ‘full [economic] expansion and... positive signs of social mobility’” (Picó 2017:271-280). This was the decade which saw the establishment of the Institution of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP) (Picó 2017:281). The ICP contributed to the expansion of tourism on the island in its work to restore historically significant public and private buildings in San Juan, among other preservation tasks in the arts and research. Tourism arrivals then began to increase significantly, spurred on mostly by the attractiveness of the moderate Caribbean weather experienced in the winter (Picó 2017:282). Soon enough, the success of the Caribé Hilton Hotel catalyzed the arrival of more hotel chains along the beach communities in San Juan. Tourism began to play a much larger role in the employment sector with these developments, and the amount of registered guests in Puerto Rico grew by more than elevenfold through to the 1980s (ibid).

Of course, tourism was not the only growing sector at this time. Industry and manufacturing companies would help further develop Puerto Rican infrastructure. As such, factories were set up that required a massive labor force and which would thus take advantage of the lucrative tax laws offered by the Fomento administration (Picó 2017:271). The creation of these jobs incentivized the migration of landless tenant farmers from the interior of the island to settle on marginal public land in the urban zone (Safa 1974:21). Agricultural jobs subsequently
diminished from 1940 to 1984 by nearly 600% (Picó 2017:272). At the same time, manufacturing jobs increased threefold on the island, with 60% of males living in marginal shantytowns working as operatives, service workers, and laborers (Safa 1974:22). By the 1970s, the most significant industrial plants on the island were pharmaceutical and electronics factories.

With these new industries booming and contributing to the continued development of infrastructure on the island, the Puerto Rican government began targeting tourism as one of the critical sectors of the island’s economy. Muñoz Marín’s *Fomento* administration was among the many in the postwar era that “exploited the myth that ‘sun and san’ tourism was eternally sustainable” (Ward 2008:xix). Teodoro Moscoso, as head of the PRIDCO, was particularly influential in the further development of the tourism sector in Puerto Rico, noting that the island’s landscape was rife with “promising resort areas” (Ward 2008:16). Dorado Beach, some 20 miles west of San Juan, attracted such investors as Robert Trent Jones Sr., who designed an oceanfront golf course in the adjacent Sardinera Bay (Ward 2008:59). More notably attracted to the area was Laurence Rockefeller, who opened his Dorado Beach Hotel on December 2, 1958 (Ward 2008:58). The hotel was constructed as a part of Muñoz Marín’s Operation Serenity, which attempted to “acclimate” Puerto Ricans across the island to the drastic social, political, and infrastructural changes implemented by *Fomento* (Esterrich 2018:29). By breaking ground away from San Juan, this decentralized attempt at resort tourism would work to enfranchise, invigorate, and more importantly, modernize Puerto Ricans outside of the metropolitan area. The project was initially optioned by Moscoso as a $500,000 loan package from PRIDCO (Ward 2008:69). Yet after much bargaining on Rockefeller’s end, Dorado Beach ended up costing a total of $1.3 million in taxpayer dollars. Due to the undeveloped nature of the local surroundings,
an electric plant and sewage system, necessary to appease foreign tourists, significantly spiked the budget. As such, the priorities of PRIDCO and the *Fomenta* administration became highlighted in their provision of modern infrastructure to impoverished Puerto Rican communities only if there was economic benefit for the business and political classes.

It was PRIDCO’s hope that its investments into the Dorado Beach Hotel would provide the cutting-edge model of tourism development in the 20th century (Ward 2008:61). The hotel initially enjoyed a twelve month occupancy average of over 80%, and further development of the infrastructure propelled the resort and surrounding community to a “hemispheric importance” (Ward 2008:73). In spite of these initial developments, however, both Rockefeller and PRIDCO might have been overzealous when it came to their joint venture in decentralization. By the 1970s, Puerto Rico’s tourism market was experiencing a decline that posed a threat to investments in further expansions (Ward 2008:74). Previously, the large influx of visitors to the island was seen as a positive symptom of US consumerist ideologies working to modernize the island (Merril 2001:213). However, mass tourism was also beginning to play a negative effect on the image of the island in creating an overpopulated market. This, coupled with an oversupply of rooms on the island, negatively affected the business venture of the Dorado Beach Resort (Ward 2008:77). In spite of these warnings, Rockefeller pushed for expansion, neglecting a contemporary study which argued that more than half the rooms being built in Puerto Rico at the time would be unnecessary (Ward 2008:75). By 1977, this expenditure forced Rockefeller to sell management and control of Dorado Beach, along with a second hotel of his, Cerromar, to Regent International (Ward 2008:75).
The troubles which ailed the joint PRIDCO-Rockefeller venture into decentralized resorts can best be summed up by an observation offered in 1975 by Charles A. Bell, an executive of Hilton International: “These vacation travel oriented hotels are highly sensitive to the slightest hint of a recession” (in Ward 2008:85). Bell is not the only one in touch with the reality of creating a leisure economy whose stability is based in the influx and fiscal contribution of nonnative tourists. Paul Weber, president of Almar International, was aware of the toxicity which is tied up in the constant expansion of profit in businesses (Ward 2008:57). When the Dorado Beach Hotel was operating at capacity during its heyday, Weber all but predicted the downfall of the hotel in its desire to expand:

“Almost the only way for a resort doing capacity business can make more money is to expand. I hope this will not happen to the Dorado Beach for a long time… For the present I can only hope that the Caribbean and Hawaiian Islands will not become Coney Islands.” (in Ward 2008:57)

Mings (1968:9) also provides further insight on the dangers that a tourism-dependent economy presents. Despite the contemporary augmentation of support for the economy by PRIDCO, those in leadership positions on the island remained hesitant as to tourism’s place in Puerto Rico’s economy. Muñoz Marín had well known reservations regarding tourism. His gubernatorial successor, Roberto Sánchez Vilella, was quoted in 1958 saying that “tourism should not convert San Juan into another Miami Beach.” Both Severo E. Colberg and Cesar Calderon, a prominent professor and businessman (respectively), made comments regarding how dangerous tourism was to the native peoples trying to advertise it, with Calderon marking that “it carries a great potential danger against which we must defend ourselves” (in ibid).
In spite of these warnings, tourism in Puerto Rico only continues to grow. Monthly tourism entries into Puerto Rico prior to the COVID-19 pandemic capped out at approximately 231,000 in December 2019 (Trading Economics 2020). Job growth in the sector between January 1990 and March 2020 went from 35,400 to 80,500, a nearly 230% increase (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). The sector represents a total of 10% of the island’s GDP (Talty 2018), which in 2019 sat at $105 billion (Trading Economics 2020). To lose approximately $10 billion of those dollars due to a global pandemic, when international travel is disavowed, posed a grave threat to the local economy, as is the case with small island developing states (SIDS) who have a crippling dependency on the influx of tourist capital.

The above section of this study provided an overview of the unsustainable tourism economy by analyzing its early historiography. In the postwar years, with industrialization and urbanization on the minds of Puerto Rican politicians, the attractiveness of external investments through the tourism economy proved to be simultaneously irresistible and erratic. Many professionals and politicians noticed the red flags from the start yet still permitted for the growth of the sector. The next section of this study will track the effects of COVID-19 on the Puerto Rican tourism economy using news articles and press releases since March 2020. It will analyze the failed neoliberal privatization policies implemented by both the local and federal governments that have led to such a disastrous response to the pandemic and recession.
“When newcomers descended en masse, the virus had an excellent chance of commandeering countless human cells for an orgy of mass replication… in other words, launching what humans regard as an epidemic.” (McNeil 2010:62)

The implementation of NAFTA in 1993 created a new model for American businesses to find cheap labor outside of its borders. The same year, President Clinton removed tax incentives previously driving external investment in Puerto Rico (Bonilla 2020 (2):6), and the industries providing 165,000 jobs on the island disappeared (Rohter 1993). Local banks, piggybacking off of the Federal Reserve, began borrowing irresponsible loans from vulture capitalists that led to the accumulation of an unplayable $120 billion debt (Morales 2015; Perez Semanaz 2020). By 2015, this debt was declared unpayable, yet a federal legislation from 1984 prevented US territories from filing for bankruptcy. Instead, Puerto Rico became the site of further neoliberal experimentation when the US Congress passed the PROMESA law in 2016 (Rivera Fernandez 2021). This legislative action provided President Obama with the power to establish a Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), a federal entity charged with taking control over Puerto Rico’s debt payments, budget, and economy.

The FOMB’s directives were aimed at minimizing public spending and allocating capital towards debt payment. An absent and powerless government sat aside as the federally-managed
board stripped Puerto Rico of basic infrastructural and educational components, among many others (Rivera Fernandez 2021). The failure of these budget cuts is made explicit in the aftermath of Hurricane María, when the island suffered from a kaput power grid, road blockades caused by large debris, and corrupted water resources. The government “had virtually ceased to function” in providing aid for its citizens (Bonilla 2020 (2):5). Instead, officials focused on attracting private investors to “help” in the reconstruction by declaring 98% of the island’s territory an “opportunity zone” (Bonilla 2020 (1):155).

This government apathy, both local and federal, carried over into the subsequent crisis for Puerto Rico – the arrival of COVID-19. On March 15, Governor Wanda Vázquez “chided” the Puerto Rican populous for failing to stay at home before implementing a nighttime curfew (Ayala & Mazzei 2020). Accompanying this curfew would be the shutdown of all businesses thought to be non-essential, including bars, shopping malls, and movie theaters. These measures, while in-theory helping to curb the spread of COVID-19, neglect to account for the entry of tourists to the island, one of the primary vectors of the disease. Pleas from the insular government to Washington to prematurely close its borders, as per CDC recommendations, were shut down (Puerto Rico Tourism Company 2020). As such, an increasing amount of potentially viremic hosts from across the globe continued to enter the island.

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019, global tourism had been growing at the constant rate of about 6% per annum (Baker 2015:1). In total, from 1950 to 2014, international tourist arrivals increased from 25 million to 1.1 billion, a forty-five fold increase. Particularly conducive to growth were developing countries in tropical and subtropical regions, where lowland, warm and humid geo-climates make for perfect breeding grounds for viral vectors. In
the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, one study found that a 10% increase in inbound tourism produces a 9% increase in COVID-19 prevalence (Hoarau 2020:2403). A separate study concluded that a seven-row difference aboard airplanes is still close enough for transmission of severe-acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), another respiratory disease caused by a coronavirus (Baker 2015:6).

Cruise ships, and naval travel in general, play significant roles in the transmission of diseases between viremic bodies and potential hosts. Small island developing states (SIDS) who depend on naval vessels for tourism entry are at greater risk than most other states (Gaffney & Eeckles 2020:311). In the early colonial era of the Caribbean, ships were functional “super-vectors” for contagion of diseases (McNeill 2010:51). Since then, not much has changed, with one study from Aruba showing that cruise passengers were less likely to cancel trips even after experiencing symptoms of dengue fever (Oduber et al. 2014:240). In Puerto Rico, the entry of COVID-19 was catalyzed by the arrival of one cruise ship, the Costa Luminosa, which carried at least two known positive cases of COVID-19 to the island. Apart from the two known positive cases, the ship also carried 1,240 other passengers, some of whom conducted excursions away from the San Juan metropolitan area (Torres Gotay 2020). The arrival of the Luminosa to Puerto Rico in-effect presents the first super spreader event on the island. When over a thousand passengers incubating alongside COVID-19 disembarked from the ship, the urban area of San Juan, which houses 2.5 million of the island’s population of 3 million, became susceptible to a rapid spread (Macrotrends 2021).

It is perhaps inevitable that if the federal government had permitted Puerto Rico to close its borders, COVID-19 would have still found its way into the island. Yet, in spite of previous
institutional failures to provide for its constituents, the insular government’s position in placing the responsibility of the spread upon the population is irrational. Examples of large government presence and spending, as is the case with New Zealand, have succeeded in eliminating COVID-19 within its borders (Melinek 2020). At the other end of the spectrum, Puerto Rican leadership has been virtually nonexistent throughout the duration of the pandemic. In March 2020, three successive health secretaries resigned due to the pressure of the pandemic (Perez Semanaz 2020). This type of absent leadership resulted in the purchase of a suspect testing kit package for $38 million (Latino USA 2020), as well as the failure to provide a testing kit to an elderly man who subsequently tested positive (Torres Gotay 2020). Such administrative failures led the CDC to insinuate that Puerto Rican authorities did not adequately handle the testing samples sent to them.

Economic complications arise with the inevitable shutdown of tourism across the globe. In Puerto Rico, a drop in tourist visits by 75% in March 2020 was accompanied by a 57% reduction in the tourism industry labor force (Trading Economics 2020; US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). Unemployment rates skyrocketed across all industries, with 76,928 Puerto Ricans applying for unemployment benefits by the end of March (Perez Semanaz 2020), up nearly 82% from pre-pandemic numbers (94,000). In spite of the curfew and closure measures implemented by Governor Vázquez, recorded case numbers continued rising at a steady rate throughout the summer (The New York Times 2021).

Yet, as is the case with all crises, opportunities for business arise within the tourism industry. By July 2020, businesses which had been losing a steady stream of money were ready to reopen Puerto Rico under a “strict set of health and safety standards” (Puerto Rico Tourism
Company 2020). Hotels were permitted to reopen common and commercial spaces, such as pools and bars, to 50%, with tourism companies announcing the necessity for a “gold standard in safety.” At the same time, many of these companies have maintained pro-business mindsets while spouting opportunistic, capital-oriented rhetoric. Brad Dean, the head of Discover Puerto Rico, the island’s destination marketing organization, wrote in a LinkedIn post commemorating World Tourism Day in September 2020: “But with every recession comes recovery, and who isn’t eager to be a part of #TheGreatRecovery?” (Dean 2020). Carlos Mercado, the newly designated executive director of the Puerto Rican Tourism Company, seems focused on “[emphasizing] how safe the destination is” (Vásquez Colón 2020). At the same time, he is pushing to decentralize tourism beyond the metropolitan area and bidding for year-end conferences that do not yet have set destinations.

The pro-business priorities by both state and private operatives continue to focus on “opportunity zones” (Bonilla 2020 (1):155) for investment and return on external capital. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this toxic dependency remains aided and abetted by the government of Puerto Rico in its desire to move forward with the reopening process. In January 2021, the CDC implemented new regulations for the handling of tourism during the pandemic, which requires that international air travelers produce a negative COVID-19 test upon entry into the United States (Curley 2021). In spite of these increased restrictions for the mainland, the newly-elected governor of Puerto Rico, Pedro Pierluisi opted in January to reopen beaches and shorten the curfew so as to attract more tourism business to the island (Coto 2021). “Our objective must be to be able to return to a new norm,” Pierluisi commented.
The idea of returning to this “new norm” using a “gold standard of safety” seems much more akin to the repackaging of standard tourism using a COVID-“proof” duct-tape. In reality, the reconstruction of paradise landscapes in the post-pandemic world “[privileges the] movements of some” while forbidding the “movement, migration and interconnection between the poor, powerless, and exploited” (Glick Schiller & Salazar in Sheller 2020:9). In essence, the increasing closures of entry to the United States as per the CDC requirement do not solely function as health and safety standards. Rather, they are coupled with the reopening of tourism businesses not just in Puerto Rico, but across the Caribbean and other “paradises” which make up the global world of the tourists. It permits travel to these regions but restricts travel from, thus creating a racial “im/mobility” (Sheller 2020:9) that stigmatizes those within the target regions as second-class citizens.

Yet many businesses fail to account for what Baker (2015:5) considers to be of paramount importance in the discussion of travel and disease transmission. He argues that there is no true destination or origin, but rather a loop between those destinations and origins. Since the 1950s, an increasing middle class has used vacation benefits, availability of credit, and cheaper airfare, among other factors, to contribute to a global economy whose only financial competition is oil (Merril 2001:179-180). These leisure travelers interact with each other, with the “paradise landscape” locals, and with the communities which await them upon their return. This network thus renders participants and non-participants susceptible to diseases that might be transmitted during travel.

From understanding the above, there arises the urgent need to rebuild more sustainable measures as opposed to adapting the “essential” tourism industry of many of these tourism-
dependent countries to a global pandemic. Scholars such as Sheller (2020) highlight how there are methods of doing so by promoting local forms of tourism and indigenized knowledge. In the case of the Caribbean, she disavows the “quick fix” policies that we have seen in the aftermath of disasters and crises such as Hurricane María and the COVID-19 pandemic, and instead espouses a return to the traditional horticultural practices which had been conducted prior to colonization. That is not to say that tourism should be eradicated as a form of economy. Rather, it must be made sustainable, not place any significant risk upon the visitor or the visited, and disenfranchise the capitalist narratives which have long defined modern tourism.

Those narratives are highlighted in the above section, which provides a narrative on the development of neoliberal failures on the island, coupled with private and public responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The insular and federal governments, in preferring to keep operations running, have displayed a murderous apathy towards the general public that has long been at play. Thus, Puerto Rico failed to properly respond to the crisis it currently faces because of its staunch dependency on exploitative tourism as an economy. Even when tourism brings its promised development, it is only when the industry is developing itself so as to accumulate more traveler influx. This is at the expense of both the proletariat as well as the travelers, both of whom are rendered expendable in the eyes of the business-owner classes. The subsequent section, which utilizes data drawn from interviews from two travelers to Puerto Rico during the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforces these findings. From a first-person perspective, it analyzes the failed protocols instituted by the island and highlights dangers of travel during the pandemic.
The narratives drawn for the following section are taken from two interview sessions with two separate subjects, both of whom traveled to Puerto Rico over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both subjects are personally affiliated with the author of this thesis. As such, to disguise their identities from readers, the aliases given to them are Alex Greengrass and Esteban Perez.

Alex is a student athlete at an Ivy League university. He traveled to Puerto Rico towards the end of January 2021. “[The pandemic] is worse than I thought it could have been”, he says. “That’s why I went to Puerto Rico, to release some stress.”

Alex mentions he visited Puerto Rico after discovering cheap rates for flight tickets and an AirBNB to stay in: “Pandemic rates…. I don’t think I’ll ever have a trip that cheap again.” He spent $30 on a Spirit Airlines flight to the island, less than $100 for the BNB, and under $100 in food. He would often eat at food trucks that sold shrimp and steak tacos, *mofongo*, and beer at $3 a can. The one meal he sat down for was at a restaurant in Old San Juan selling *comida criolla* – “mofongo, pork and brown rice with beans…. Most, if not all of the restaurants were dine-in. ‘Social distanced’, whatever that means at this point,” Alex notes about the eatery, “and they were all packed. Everybody was out enjoying themselves.”
Alex discussed the safety protocols in place when describing his night out in Santurce’s La Placita, a courtyard of drinking joints and street eateries that is popular amongst locals and tourists alike:

“La Placita was packed. There were so many people. People were out playing dice, the [NFL] playoff games were on, so everyone was out watching the game…. Most of the roads were blocked, and there was this one road that led into the courtyard of La Placita…. There’s no cars running through, so people just take up all the space there. And everybody’s out. Most people weren’t even dining in the restaurants. They were out in the roads, listening to the music playing… And nobody was wearing a mask in La Placita. Everyone was enjoying it like it was a normal day in 2020 before corona came.”

I visited La Placita some three years ago with a group of my cousin’s friends. It is the type of place that promotes an enjoyable nightlife of drinking, eating, and clubbing. In the context of the time that I visited, summer of 2018, the courtyard was packed with enough people to fill up a small shopping mall on Black Friday. Alex mentioning that there was little abiding by strict COVID-19 protocols is worrisome, given especially that he describes it as “packed.” He mentions that in terms of mitigation, the presence of security personnel at the entrance of the courtyard was accompanied only by “hand sanitizer posts.” Given that COVID-19 is less commonly spread through surface contact than through respiratory droplets (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), the implementation of hand sanitizer posts as opposed to enforcing mask-wearing is insufficient to guarantee the health safety of those at La Placita.

“I didn’t stay too long,” says Alex, voicing concern regarding La Placita’s safety protocols. “It’s real at-risk for catching something.” Curiously enough, Alex noted that most of the people out enjoying themselves in La Placita were locals. His attendance that evening could very well mean that there were other tourists within the area, but most of the tourists he saw were found in Old San Juan, visiting historical sites, walking the cobblestone roads, taking pictures:
“[The city] was mostly tourists, so it was people who were scared of catching [COVID-19]. There was a good amount of native people from what I could tell, but I think everyone in Old San Juan was wearing masks, because all the historical sites with tourism, they have to enforce it.”

Among the sites Alex visited are El Morro de San Felipe, as well as the now-defunct Estadio Sixto Escobar, a sporting complex turned historical site in 2014 (Costello 2017). He tried visiting La Fortaleza (the governor’s mansion) as well, but found that it was closed off to the public:

“Like, you couldn’t even get close. Like the road that led up to it, they were just like, no. Just don’t even try it… There were government vehicles probably like half a mile out in all directions just to make sure nobody got close.”

The concentrated placement of government vehicles around La Fortaleza is curious. Normally, the road leading up to the governor’s mansion is open to the public, with picturesque umbrellas or perhaps an elongated banner of the Puerto Rican flag hanging above the pedestrians. Its closure could be the result of governmental paranoia, as popular scrutiny towards the government has remained present even during the pandemic (Latino USA 2020). A protest akin to that seen in the summer of 2019 would be catastrophic not just for governmental rule, but could also act as a super-spreader event for COVID-19 on the island. Thus, the governmental blockade of La Fortaleza can be seen as a double-edged sword.

My second interview subject, Esteban Perez, noted that the distribution of official personnel was burdensome for maintaining a strict COVID-19 protocol across the island. Esteban attends university in Florida, but was born and raised in Puerto Rico and visited twice during the pandemic to see family. His primary concern was the spreading of the virus to his family from traveling, and notes that if the protocol was more strictly maintained, there would be a greater sense of safety among those traveling. However:
“[The island] didn’t have the personnel or strategies to do that…. In terms of the laws and regulations they had in place there, they were stricter than in the states, but in terms of results and the social aspects, they need more than just police to apply those laws. They were not there.”

Esteban stayed with his family Altos Arboles (alias), a small town located in the interior of the island. “I always make the joke that the same street that gets you into Altos Arboles, the same one takes you out,” he laughs. As such, Esteban notes, Altos Arboles does not receive the same influx of tourists as would San Juan, with its myriad historical sites and photogenic buildings. However, that is not to say the town has not experienced its fair share of hardships during the pandemic. Esteban notes how the restrictions put in place by the government particularly affected small businesses that were forced to close at 8:30 pm. Yet due to the lack of official personnel helping to manage the protocols on the island, efforts gradually became deputized in underfunded areas.

“The way this was enforced was if there was a business that you saw was still open, you could call the police, and they would go to the business and would manage and go deal with it… I mean, there’s a huge problem with the lack of personnel in the police in Puerto Rico for answering to those social issues. I think it was a huge responsibility that they put on the police that restricted them from attending to other issues that might have been more important.”

Esteban notes how underfunding is a consistent problem across multiple sectors of Puerto Rican society. As a social science education major, he is especially concerned with the mistreatment of the public education system during the pandemic, already financially devastated due to widespread closures forced by the federally appointed Financial Oversight and Management Board (Brusi & Godreau in Bonilla & Lebrón 2019). “Between 2008 and 2018, almost 40% of all public schools were closed,” Esteban says. “Like, that’s something you do when you want to divest from social capital and keep people uneducated.” Indeed, the governmental apathy has extended into the treatment of public educational institutions. Once in
charge, the FOMB forced the shutdown of many K-12 schools which later reopened via private American funding (Rivera Fernandez 2021). The privatization of education left many impoverished young Puerto Ricans without a proper education, and as such, without the increasing requirements to join the workforce.

Esteban notes that during the pandemic, there has been a particular problem in rural and mountainous regions, where a singular phone is the only access to internet in many houses. This issue has become prevalent in the era of digital education, with schools being closed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and forcing classes online. “[Schools] were supposed to give students by August access to tablets to be able to take their classes online,” Esteban says. However, without the proper equipment to do so, online education for many Puerto Ricans became a prevalent issue throughout the school year. Esteban notes that in spite of the state having the capability to provide equitable internet access, laws favoring private businesses prevent the distribution of wifi to households. “So in places like Utuado or Orocovis, where it’s like deep in the mountains, it makes no sense for businesses to go there and provide wifi for those communities because it’s not profitable,” he says. As in the case of the development of Rockefeller’s Dorado Beach Resort, infrastructural development only occurs when there is a profit to be made. For the government, its impoverished and underfunded constituents must fend for themselves.

While Esteban stayed primarily within Altos Arboles during his time in Puerto Rico, he conducted a few excursions outside of the town, notably to Ponce, Cabo Rojo, and San Juan. He only briefly visited Ponce to pick up ice cream from a shop that’s “very famous there”. He visited Cabo Rojo for a weekend, but because of the pandemic restrictions and the low amounts
of tourists in the area, many of the shops were closed for the season. His visit to San Juan in the summer was similarly brief, but more insightful. Driving through the city, he saw “tourists, tourists, and more tourists,” noting as well that a cruise ship had docked. However, after I expressed doubts that cruise ships were in operation over the summer, he said he definitely saw a ship there, but it might not have been a cruise.

Regardless, Esteban reiterated his worry about the weak enforcement of COVID-19 protocols, mentioning that “[authorities] were requesting that people bring in COVID tests, proving they were negative, but many people didn’t know about it or they weren’t doing it.” This evidence corroborates the protocol standardized over the summer of 2020, with COVID-19 tests being offered, but remaining voluntary to the travelers (Puerto Rico Tourism Company, 2020). The slack granted to travelers in terms of ensuring their own safety is further evidence of the governmental attempt to individualize safety measures and recuse itself of responsibility. Though the risk lies in the rules of the game, those who are willing to play are responsible for their own safety. And in the case of local Puerto Rican communities, the racial and economic “im/mobilities” of the global south force those who would otherwise not play to take risk in the game anyway (Sheller 2020:9).

This is upsetting in many ways for both Esteban and the general Puerto Rican population. “[There was a bit] of being mad or disappointed that the decision of closing the airport or stopping the entrance of cruises was out of our hands,” he says. This is in spite of calls from “diverse groups on the island, people who don’t agree on almost anything, [coming] together to say ‘Hey, let’s close the airport. Let’s stop having an influx of tourists. Let’s not let anyone who’s not living here get in because they could bring COVID.”’ While many of the tourists were in fact
wearing masks, Esteban says that social distance measures were not taken seriously inside stores and restaurants. As such, he says that there remained a general fear from the insular population when seeing tourists, and that pockets frequented by external visitors were avoided by residents of Puerto Rico because of a contagion risk.

These findings present conflicting solutions, then. Although international COVID-19 case numbers are beginning to downtrend (Center for Systems Science and Engineering 2021), Alex, a non-native visitor to Puerto Rico, stresses the same fears as Esteban when considering the possibility of contagion. Large crowds of people interacting with each other remains conducive of fear regardless of a person’s status of visitor or visited. Yet at the same time, Puerto Rico and the world as a whole are slowly beginning to reopen, not only disregarding the fears displayed by potential travelers, but disregarding evidence that reopening the industry could potentially endanger all agents involved. And given the efforts by governments and businesses to reopen even while case numbers were at a positive trend, it seems unlikely there will be attempts to close once more in order to outright stop the spread of the disease.
Conclusion: Worth The While

“Soy un pedazo de tierra que vale la pena.” “I am a parcel of land worth the while.”

– Calle 13, “Latinoamérica”

The history of the Caribbean, and subsequently, the history of Puerto Rico, is the history of exploitive powers encroaching upon indigenous land. This history has been constant, with different actors fulfilling the roles of the colonizers. Early on, the Spanish decimated the aboriginal Taíno population through the introduction of Old World diseases. They established the city of San Juan and used it as a port-of-ways to trade slaves, sugar, and gold stolen from the Americas for the better part of four centuries (Rivera Fernandez 2021). Later, the arrival of the American plantationocene in the 20th century saw the supersizing of Spanish haciendas into corporate colonias, where powerful overseers controlled worker polling stations (Mintz 1974:150). Yet this system of life would soon dissipate with the arrival of American industry and manufacturing, which by the 1970s overtook agriculture as the leading economy on the island (Picó, 2017, 272). This bound impoverished Puerto Ricans to fringe communities outside the urban centers and made them increasingly dependent upon public welfare to get by (Safa 1974:12). Wall Street hedge funds and vulture capitalists would get their time sucking the colony dry as well, with an extant $120 billion public debt federally managed by the Financial Oversight and Management Board (Perez Semanaz 2020). Today, the increasing arrival of opportunistic
Americans, like Logan Paul and Peter Schiff, looking to take advantage of the island’s lack of a federal income tax shows how it pays to be privileged. This systematic failure to grant Puerto Ricans the right to autonomy and self-sufficiency has cultivated an apathetic government which allowed the deaths of more than 4,000 individuals in the aftermath of Hurricane María (Rivera Fernandez 2021).

The Puerto Rican government’s prolonged pro-business mindset has permitted the reopening of the tourism industry in spite of a widespread popular fear of COVID-19 contagion (Puerto Rican Tourism Company 2020; Coto 2021). It is also perpetuated by the extant colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. By not being allowed to close its borders to entry from potentially viremic tourists, Puerto Rico was forced to play the game of capitalism. It is a game which has led to the infection of 141,000 of its citizens and the deaths of 2,100 (The

![New COVID-19 infections per day, Puerto Rico (March 2021)](image)

And while vaccination programs begin to roll out across the world, Puerto Rico’s rate of 12% ranks at the very bottom of US charts, tied only with the state of Utah. Should spring breakers and summer vacationers continue flocking to the island without a steady vaccination program for the general population, the case numbers and death rates will continue trending positive, as they have since the middle of March 2021.

The exploitation of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans by both local and foreign elite has led to public demands to change the system. In 2019, protests abounded after then-Governor Rosselló’s group chat was leaked to the public, which included texts calling for “the vultures” to be fed the cadavers of victims of Hurricane María (Tormos-Aponte 2019). On the busiest day of the protests, over one million Puerto Ricans, including members of the working class, activists from the LGBTQ+ community and Colectiva Feminista, and even some prominent Puerto Rican artists such as Bad Bunny and Residente took part in the protests (Rivera Fernandez 2021). La Fortaleza was bombarded with a single nonpartisan desire to oust Rosselló.

In 2020, the governmental failure to properly respond to endemic earthquakes and the outbreak of COVID-19 led to further protests. This time, an angry crowd of Puerto Ricans denounced the government’s “genocidal tendency” (Bonilla 2020 (3):2) and carried a guillotine down Calle de la Fortaleza to present it before Governor Vázquez (The Guardian 2020). They later repeated this action in June of the same year, when the murder of George Floyd sparked Black Lives Matter protests across the world (Mesa 2020). Perhaps the “half-mile” blockade of La Fortaleza, as described above by Alex Greengrass, was the result of an increased elitist fear of an angry general populous. One thing remains certain, however – that the systematic neglect of the populous by its government is present in all forms. Elected officials prefer to preserve the
paradise landscapes which attract foreign economic input to the island while promoting a “gold standard in safety” that exploits both the visitors and the visited.

The purpose of this study has not been to demonize travel – far from it. The very idea of this project was initially conceptualized as a videoethnographic study on Puerto Rico’s tourism industry, with a focus on the working class individuals which both contribute to the industry through their work and depend on it economically. This would have required not only travel to Puerto Rico, but an active economic participation in the tourism industry. Unfortunately, the global pandemic forced a change in plans that resulted in this study becoming a literature review, with data collected using both academic and journalistic search tools such as JSTOR and Google Alerts. Searches and updates in “COVID-19”, “tourism”, “Puerto Rico” provided me with sufficient evidence to construct the literature review. Some semi-ethnographic evidence was also collected over the digital conference app Zoom with subjects from my personal network. This evidence, though not meant to be comprehensive, offered a unique first person insight to travel during the pandemic. However, the purpose of this study has remained consistent throughout the process of its conceptualization, research, and writing – to educate on the instability that tourism industries across the globe face when catastrophe strikes.

Tourism has particularly made SIDS vulnerable to catastrophe. In the case of Puerto Rico, we can return once more to the aftermath of Hurricane María. Tourism entry into the island reached a historic low of 12,000 entries in October 2017, and approximately the same amount of workers in the industry lost their jobs (Trading Economics 2020; US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). The government almost immediately sponsored a campaign to bring tourism back to Puerto Rico, declaring the island open in December 2017 (Warren 2020). New hotels were
popping up and old ones were taking reservations by January 2018. The Puerto Rican Tourism Company began flying in travel influencers to boost the public image of a “recovered” Puerto Rico. The next year, Discover Puerto Rico conducted celebrity campaigns with Lin Manuel Miranda, Jimmy Fallon, and Bad Bunny to further contribute to a catalogue of travel propaganda that made 2019 the most lucrative year for tourism in Puerto Rico.

Meanwhile, development and recovery of the island’s population lagged behind what was portrayed in the media. It took eleven months after María’s landfall to fully restore the power grid (Fernandez Campbell 2018). Particularly affected were regions within the interior of the island, out of sight and out of mind of both tourists and the media. These are the same single-road communities that Esteban mentioned suffered heavily during the COVID-19 economic fallout. One of them, Cayey, was out of power for an extended duration of time as the electrical grid was being restored, and suffered again from a power outage in April 2018 when a tree fell onto a power line (Acevedo and Associated Press 2018). My granduncle, a resident of Cayey, passed away on September 25, 2018 from complications which resulted from the aftermath of Hurricane María.

It is these narratives which are so often forgotten in place of the Enchantment Island espoused by tourism ads. While all things are not miserable in Puerto Rico, not all things are sun, sea, and sand either. In many ways, the public focus on tourism narratives reinforces Sheller’s (2020:9) argument of racial and class “im/mobilities” in that the areas and populations which attract the most capital are those which gain the most attention. Meanwhile, Puerto Ricans who live outside of the tourism zone wait in vain for “development” to occur. They are ultimately left to fend for themselves.
There are ways to change this dichotomy, however. By decreasing focus on a consumptive, capitalistic tourism, regenerative forms of tourism can arise. This has been an increased focus for tourism operatives in Puerto Rico. With the infrastructural and systematic failures seen in the aftermath of Hurricane María, many people have begun to focus on localized forms of tourism which promote an educative and sustainable experience. One group in the majority-black municipality of Loiza is focused on highlighting African narratives in Puerto Rican culture by exploring bomba, a dance which invokes “ancestral heritage, a form of spirituality and a language that unites Afro-Caribbean people” (Girma 2019). Another initiative, known as Hotels Verdes, are locally-run operations which synthesize ecological architecture with efforts to promote the history and culture of the island (Martínez Rabanal 2019). Major hotels and cruise liners might still dominate the industry, but these initiatives have proven worthwhile efforts to combat the standard capitalist narratives which have driven travel for so long. They offer unique experiences that promote an education of Puerto Rican culture while still following the tourism model of experience.

Education, then, must be the new purpose of tourism if it is to become a sustainable means of economy. If nothing else, the pandemic has shown us how fragile and volatile the world is. By engaging with it in a way which seeks to understand as opposed to exploit, travelers, in whatever region they chose to go to, can grow to appreciate what makes each destination truly special. That’s not to say we should welcome even well-intending live-action role players dressing as Taínos and Spanish settlers to precolombian burial grounds. Neither should too much focus be paid to highly-educated non-native tour operators in San Juan who recently earned a degree on Caribbean history. These examples would only further appropriate the culture of the
visited on a level that seems either fabricated or elitist. In many ways, it could contribute to the perpetuation of exploitive, capitalistic tourism as much as do “sun and sand” resorts. It could even lead to the erection of “hurricane simulators” across Puerto Rico under the guise of giving tourists the same experience locals have had.

Rather, commodification of the indigenous should be replaced with amplification of and collaboration with those same individuals, so that a true identity might be revealed to tourists. There are myriad voices across all tourism destinations which could highlight cultures long overshadowed by Rockefeller’s and Hilton’s concrete cathedrals. A local, person-based emphasis would help advertise the unique backgrounds which these traditionally tourist geographies have hidden. That way, travel subsequently becomes socialized, with unique identities drawn for each destination that create healthy competition, contribute to a canon of local identities on a world stage, and take away from the capitalistic idea of simply traveling to whatever beach is shiniest, whatever skies are clearest, or whichever land is worth the while. For the world has worthwhile lands in every corner, from the golden Sahara to an incandescent Paris to the crystalline waters of Puerto Rico. It is simply up to travelers to seek out what makes them so.
Bibliography


Biographical Sketch

Carlos Rivera Fernandez is interested in stories of people on the verge of change. As such, colonial studies have served as the foundation for his undergraduate research. With a major in anthropology and minors in Spanish and Russian, Carlos has conducted, presented, and published a wide array of research. In February 2021, he presented his article “Ya no se deja: The Evolution of Puerto Rican Sociopolitical Solidarity” at the Florida Undergraduate Research Conference. This article was later selected for publication in *The Owl*, Florida State University’s undergraduate research journal. In March 2021, he presented the paper “Wahhabis at War: Oil, Islam, and Jihad in post-Soviet Chechnya” at the AAR/SBL Southeastern Regional Conference. He was also inducted into the Lambda Alpha National Anthropological Honors Society in January 2021. Carlos is also interested in narrative history and filmmaking, having conducted a videoethnography on Valencian nationalism when studying abroad with FSU International Programs (*València: Comunitat, Identitat, I Història*; available on YouTube). His research on Sergei Bondarchuk’s screen adaptation of *War and Peace* was selected for presentation at the 2020 European and Eurasian Undergraduate Research Symposium. He later adapted his work into a video essay (“From Literature to Film – *War & Peace* by Tolstoy and Bondarchuk”; available on YouTube). Carlos has also taken part in various film productions, having written and directed two narrative short films (*This Way* and *There’s Nobody Here*; available on Amazon Prime Video). It is his hope to combine the technical aspects of filmmaking with the academic research methods of anthropology in order to complete a masters degree in film anthropology in the near future. Carlos was awarded his bachelors of science in anthropology in the spring of 2021, with summa cum laude and honors in the major distinctions.